

FAITHFUL ENDURANCE



2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Eighth Message

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SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

A hymn from the early church that is still widely used today is the *Te Deum*, from the fourth century. Written in Latin, it begins *Te Deum laudamus*, “You, God, we praise.” Then it lists who is gathered to praise God and acclaim him: “To you all angels, ... Cherubim and Seraphim, sing in endless praise: Holy, holy, holy Lord.” “The glorious company of apostles praise you. The noble fellowship of prophets praise you. The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.” These are the faithful saints who have already passed into glory, into God’s presence. “Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you.” This is us, Christians who yet live on earth, but with our gaze on God in heaven.

The apostles and the prophets are the foundation of the church in its first generation. The white-robed army of martyrs are the faithful witnesses who followed. The early church lived deeply conscious of martyrdom, of the cost of following Jesus. Suffering and persecution were expected, even unto death. This army of martyrs, whose only weapon was their faithfulness, has gone ahead to their great reward, into the very presence of God, into the very presence of Jesus their Lord to whom they had remained faithful and loyal in their allegiance. The apostles, the prophets, and the martyrs have entered into their rest. They are the Church triumphant who have run the race, who have finished the course. They endured and were found faithful.

Similarly, the great cloud of witnesses listed in the hall of faith (Hebrews 11) includes many martyrs, beginning with Abel the very first martyr, slain by his brother for faithfully worshipping God.

Meanwhile, here on earth the church militant continues its fight, a fight waged not with physical weapons, but with faithfulness, perseverance and hope. The church triumphant and the church militant: this is the communion of saints which we affirm in the Apostles’ Creed.

All Saints’ Day, November 1, commemorates the church triumphant, all the Christians who have endured faithfully and entered into rest in glory. Despite the massive incursion of commercial Halloween, many churches still observe All Saints’ Day, and sing William How’s magnificent hymn, “For all the saints who from their labors rest, who Thee by faith before the world confessed.” Subsequent verses cover the Apostles, the Evangelists, the Martyrs, and then us on earth who continue the struggle. Then the hymn looks ahead to the resurrection of the dead: “But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day; The saints triumphant rise in bright array.”

The martyrs endured persecution, remaining faithful unto death. In remembrance of persecuted Christians today who persevere, the first Sunday in November, the first Sunday after All Saints’ Day, is designated International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Persecution is widespread today and is increasing.

The apostle Paul knew both sides of persecution. He was present at, and approved of, the lynching of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He was energetic in persecuting the church, dragging Christians off to prison. But Jesus confronted him on the Damascus Road:

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?” (Acts 9:4). Saul was struck blind but now he could see! Jesus is the Lord. To this Lord he gave his allegiance. Now it was Paul’s turn to be persecuted. As he preached the gospel he faced hostility. And those who responded in faith to the gospel faced hostility.

Such was the case in Thessalonica, to which Paul came on his second missionary journey. He had just been in Philippi where he had been stripped, beaten, imprisoned and begged by the authorities to leave the city. In Thessalonica a mob from the marketplace started a riot and descended on the house where they thought Paul was staying. He left the city under cover of darkness. The gospel was met with hostility. But it met also with belief: a church formed.

Shortly thereafter Paul wrote two letters in quick succession to this church in Thessalonica. In his first letter, which we looked at last year, it is clear that the church was suffering hostile opposition. This hostility intensified so that Paul felt the need to write a second pastoral letter. To this second letter we now turn our attention for the next four weeks.

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess 1:1-2 NIV)

The rest of chapter 1, verses 3-12, is one very long sentence in Greek, which NIV has helpfully divided into three paragraphs. Paul begins with thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians (3-4), takes a detour to give them some pastoral counsel concerning persecution (5-10), and closes with prayer to God for them (11-12).

1. Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians (1:3-4)

Paul starts the body of his second letter, just like the first, with thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians.

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. (1:3-4)

In his first letter Paul thanked God for “your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 1:3). Three virtues: faith, love and hope, which produce three behaviors: work, labor and endurance. Note the order of the virtues: faith, love and hope. The more familiar order of faith, hope and love makes sense in the chapter on love (1 Corinthians 13), where “the greatest of these is love” (13:13). But in both Thessalonian letters, hope is given prominence. This hope is specifically the hope in the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, his Second Coming on the Day of the Lord. Paul has already

addressed this return in two passages in the first letter (4:13-18; 5:1-11), and he will address it again in today's passage.

Faith, love and hope. Paul's interest is not the virtues themselves, but the behavior that flows from these virtues. The NIV has made this clear in its translation. Where ESV translates "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope," NIV shows that faith produces work, love produces labor, and hope produces endurance. The virtues of faith, love and hope lead to action; they make a difference in how we live daily life.

Because these two letters are so closely connected around the themes of faith, love and hope, I consider my sermons on them to be a single series under this title, "Faith, Love and Hope."

In this second letter Paul is again thankful for how the Thessalonians are living life. Their faith is growing super-abundantly. This is not simply what they believe about Jesus, the content of their faith, but the outworking of that faith in faithfulness, in loyal devotion to the one to whom they have given their allegiance.

And Paul is thankful for their love: "the love all of you have for one another is increasing." That's a very emphatic way of stating the "one-another-ness" of the Christian life. The church is a mixed assembly, a diverse group of people. They would not normally be together, but now they are "in Christ." They are a new family. And so Paul repeatedly addresses them as "brothers and sisters," 14 times in the first letter, another 7 times in this second letter.

They lived in a world of binaries: Jew-Gentile, Greek-barbarian, male-female, slave-free. But all these binaries were transcended by unity in Christ: "you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). The church is what Scot McKnight calls "a fellowship of differents." We are a people who don't belong together who have gathered around Jesus and are learning how to belong together as one people. This can be difficult.

It has been a challenging year for belonging. Because of the coronavirus pandemic we have not been able to meet in person for nearly eleven months. We have not been able to do the things that foster a sense of belonging: exchanging a hug, sharing a meal, having a heart-to-heart conversation over coffee. Yes, we can see each other in Zoom boxes, but we all long to meet in person again, to see one another face to face. But we have people who are working hard to help us connect, to help us belong together. Our Children's Ministry has launched a second round of Adopt-a-Family to connect those who are able to help with families in need of help, for example, in the provision of meals. Our Deacons oversee a Circle of Care to ensure our older folk are checked on regularly. A wonderful group of women meet every week to prepare cards to send to you all.

The past year has been challenging for belonging for another reason: politics. The country is deeply divided. The American church is deeply divided. Our own church is divided by politics. We have become a nation of "Us and Them," more than that, of "Us *versus* Them." It is often easier to live in a binary world: rich-poor, black-white, red-blue, mask-no mask, vaccine-anti-vaxx, and so on, and so on. It is easier to demonize the one with whom we disagree than to build bridges. It is easier to treat as Other, as the enemy. It is easier to exclude than to embrace. This is being played out all around the country and in countless churches. Our faithfulness to Jesus and love for one another are being stretched, often to and beyond breaking point. But, again, all our binaries find unity in Christ.

May it be said of us what Paul says of the Thessalonians, that "the love all of you have for one another is increasing." How do we get to that point? Our virtues of faith and love need to produce behavior

that promotes belonging together, gathered around Jesus.

This was happening in Thessalonica. It is clear that Paul was very fond of this church, just as he was of the church in Philippi. In his first letter he wrote,

For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. (1 Thess 2:19-20)

Paul anticipates the day when they will all come into the Lord's presence. He will point out the Thessalonian Christians to the Lord and say, "Aren't they wonderful, these people of yours?" And they will all beam with pleasure.

Here in the second letter we learn that he has been boasting about them to all the other churches, telling these others how proud he is of their perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials they are enduring. But, wait a minute! If they are such a wonderful church, why are they suffering persecutions and trials?

Why does God allow suffering? Why does he allow bad things to happen to good people? I find that many young people, in particular, ask this question. It is one of their top questions. But it is a modern question. Until a few generations ago people knew that life was hard. And in many parts of the world today people still know that life is hard. But we don't know that. We expect life to be easy, especially if we're a Christian, because God has a wonderful plan for our life. The trajectory of an easy life leads to life aboard the spaceship Axiom in the Pixar movie *Wall-E*, or in Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World*. But Scott Peck starts his book *The Road Less Traveled* with the statement, "Life is difficult."

An even bigger question is why does God allow persecution? Why does he allow his people to suffer precisely because they are being faithful to Jesus. The ancient church was deeply conscious that following Jesus was dangerous. Following in the footsteps of Jesus and the apostles and the prophets and the martyrs meant participating in the sufferings of Christ and the real possibility of participating in their martyrdom.

Some think that the church in America is persecuted. But I do not consider public health restrictions on indoor gathering to be persecution of Christians. They are not targeted at Christians. Nor is the passage of legislation with which we disagree. But there is real persecution of Christians all over the world.

Earlier this month Open Doors released its annual World Watch List for 2021, listing the top fifty countries where it is most difficult to follow Jesus. North Korea tops the list for the 20th year, but is facing stiff competition. The reasons for persecution vary considerably. Many will immediately assume that Muslim countries fill the list. But North Korea is an atheist state, which suppresses all forms of religion. India, which is in the top ten for the third year, is in the grip of Hindu nationalism, fostered from the top: Indians should be Hindu by definition. China, at #17, is secular; it accepts Christianity, but is transforming it into conformity to its Chinese communist ideology. In Malaysia at #46, Chinese and Indian churches flourish but Malays cannot be Christians by definition, again because of religious nationalism. But what is common to all the countries is that Christians are oppressed for being Christians, for faithfully following Jesus.

In 2015 ISIL captured twenty Egyptian construction workers in Libya. They were Coptic Christians. ISIL lined them up on the beach beside the Mediterranean, dressed in orange jumpsuits, and beheaded them. But there were 21 martyrs that day. Captured with

them was a man from Ghana. Given the chance to deny Christ, he instead joined them in their martyrdom. Their death was quickly rendered in a beautiful icon, the icon of the 21 Coptic Martyrs.

What do we say to such people facing persecution today? What did Paul have to say to the Thessalonians? He interrupts his prayer of thanksgiving to give some pastoral counsel, to give a word of comfort (5-10).

2. God's Justice (1:5-10)

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you. (1:5-10)

As we work through this paragraph we need to remember that this is a word of comfort to a persecuted church. It is not a systematic theology developed in a comfortable study. We need to read this paragraph in its context, written for those in the crucible of persecution.

Firstly, Paul says the current situation in which the believers are faithfully enduring in the face of persecution is evidence of God's justice, of his righteous judgment. Ten years later Paul writes something very similar to the nearby church in Philippi, that their faithful endurance in the face of their persecutors "is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God" (Phil 1:28). In his righteousness, God will judge both the persecutors and the persecuted. The faithful endurance of the Christians is proof that they are worthy of God's kingdom. In the honor-shame culture of the Greco-Roman world they had no honor; they were not considered worthy. But God deems them to be honorable, worthy of his realm.

God will enact justice by repaying both the persecutors and the persecuted. To those troubling the Christians he will give trouble. And to the Christians being troubled he will give relief. But this justice, this putting things right, will not occur now. It may not occur in their lifetime. It may not save them from martyrdom. It may not occur for many generations. There may be many more martyrs. This balancing of the books will not occur until the return of the Lord Jesus, at the second coming.

As for Jesus, in his path to the cross he submitted to the hostility of those to whom he was sent, even his own people. He was like a lamb led to the slaughter. He renounced power. But when he returns he will come with power as righteous judge, dispensing justice. When Christ returns he will work vengeance. Vengeance is not the same as revenge. Vengeance *is* justice. Negatively, it inflicts retribution for a wrong, for an injustice. Vengeance does not trivialize the wrong done nor the one who did the wrong, by letting him go unpunished. Positively, vengeance also requires that the one wronged be vindicated. It does not trivialize the wrong suffered nor the one wronged. These are the two sides of justice. But revenge is

not justice; it increases injustice by repaying evil with evil, exacerbating the problem.

The targets of Christ's vengeance are those who don't know God, that is, those who don't obey the gospel, who don't receive the good news of what God has done in Christ. They have responded in hostile rejection to God, to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to those who have embraced the gospel. They will eventually pay the penalty: eternal destruction. The nature of this is exclusion from God's presence. But they have already excluded themselves from God's presence by not acknowledging him, his gospel or his people. God's face is the last thing they want to see, but there will be no hiding from it on that day of judgment before they are cast out of his presence. This is justice, to require an accounting of the wrong-doers.

But, in contrast, the Thessalonians Christians have believed. They have nothing to fear on the day of the Lord. When he returns they will be among those who glorify him and marvel at him. In rapt adoration their gaze will be on their Lord whom they adore. They will receive their reward: the beatific vision and envelopment into God's glory. C.S. Lewis writes in "The Weight of Glory":

In the end that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexorable or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.¹

The Thessalonians can have a sure and certain hope in the return of the Lord Jesus, knowing that he will put all things right, when he returns. Meanwhile, in the present this hope should inspire their endurance. And they are to leave justice to the Lord.

So, how does Paul want the Thessalonians to live while suffering persecutions and trials? He returns to his prayer, this time moving from thanksgiving to petition.

3. Prayer for the Thessalonians (1:11-12)

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul prays that God would use his enabling power to do two things. He prays, firstly, that God would make them worthy of their calling. Their faithful endurance in the face of persecution is evidence that they are worthy of God's kingdom. Paul prays that God himself would make them worthy, enabling them to faithfully endure. The Christians do not have strength themselves, but they have God's power present in and among them. It is God's desire that they endure. He will provide the strength to do so, so that they be found worthy.

Paul prays, secondly, that God would fulfill, would bring to fruition, every desire for goodness and every deed prompted by faith. Instead of seeking to turn the tables on their persecutors they are to be and to do good. And not simply to do good, but to delight in goodness, to take great pleasure in goodness. They are to be kindly disposed, to have good will to others, even their enemies. This can be very hard because it is easier to take pleasure in hostility, in othering people. Social media algorithms push us towards an Us versus Them world. So we need to practice mental hygiene, being careful with the media that we consume and the effect it has on us to divide us, to separate us into Us versus Them.

When we delight in goodness even in the face of evil, we are able to live life in the countercultural way shown by Paul in Romans 12, our Scripture reading. We have a choice every day. To be conformed to the pattern of this world, with its “Us versus Them” mentality, its binaries, its othering of people different from us or with whom we disagree. Or to be transformed by the renewing of our mind, to live life differently, to live life the Romans 12 way. Hate what is evil and cling to what is good. Be patient in affliction. Bless those who persecute us. Do not be overcome by evil, repaying evil with evil, but overcome evil with good. As far as concerns ourselves we leave justice to God who says, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay.” God *will* bring justice. He will repay both the persecutors and the persecuted.

This does not mean that we do nothing about justice in the present. We don’t seek justice for ourselves, but, as we are able, we should seek justice for others, whether Christians or not. So, for example, we as a church support IJM and its mission to rescue people from sexual slavery and indentured servitude. We seek to bring an end to their suffering as an outworking of delighting in goodness. There are many other aspects of justice we can pursue on behalf of other people. Your response to our CityTeam Turkey drive and Christmas food drive was abundant and overwhelming. Thank you for your generosity in helping alleviate the suffering of others at this difficult time.

The result of this counter-cultural behavior is that Christ Jesus will be glorified as the grace of God and our Lord Jesus Christ is at work in us. And the believers will be glorified in him.

There were many martyrs in the early church. Many sealed their faithful witness in death. They refused to return evil for evil. Instead they entrusted themselves to God and to the Lord Jesus, himself the model faithful witness. And through this testimony, many came to faith, so astonished were they by the composure of these Christians as they faced death. Yes, God will bring justice in the end: justice on the persecutors and justice for the persecuted. But in the meantime he wants the persecuted to live in such a way that transforms even the persecutors.

Around AD 200, Tertullian, a brilliant lawyer and adult convert to Christ, wrote a defense of the faith, addressed to the “Rulers of the Roman Empire.” He wrote of the Church,

We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very

camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods... The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.²

From this last statement has come the famous saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” In the face of violent persecution the Church had grown and spread to every corner of the Empire. The only place you couldn’t find any Christians was in the pagan temples!

This continues today. For example in Iran where the underground church is growing rapidly no matter what the authorities do. It happened in China during the dark days of the Cultural Revolution, after the Western missionaries left and assumed the church was wiped out. Instead it grew abundantly. Christians follow their Lord in faithful witness and suffering and God uses this to bring about the conversion of others. I’m sure that as Paul wrote this to the Thessalonians he was deeply conscious that he had formerly been a chief persecutor.

We are not being persecuted. But we are enduring hardship. Many are suffering. May we faithfully endure and be found faithful. Since this is God’s desire he grants his power and his enabling Spirit to do so. May we delight in goodness. May we love one another and do everything we can to preserve unity. May we resist all the forces which seek to divide us, that seek to push us into an Us versus Them binary world. Through us and our faithful endurance may Christ be glorified.

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thess 3:12-13)

1. C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.

2. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.